

From unwilling celebrity to authored icon: reading *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015)

Abstract

Asif Kapadia's cinematic biography, *Amy* (2015) is a critically and commercially successful documentary feature that portrays the life and untimely death of celebrated singer Amy Winehouse. The film emphasises Winehouse's ambivalent relationship with fame, while tracing the damaging effects that unwanted celebrity had on her physical and mental health. In this forum article, I assess the merits and problems with the film as a biography/obituary. I focus particularly in its representation of a disorderly female celebrity (Holmes and Negra 2011) and in its disavowal of the authored construction of its subject through a tonal register and stylistic structure that implies intimacy and authenticity.

Keywords: female celebrity; biography; obituary; authorship; disordered celebrity

Amy Winehouse, an outwardly reluctant celebrity, became a fixture of UK tabloid reportage in the mid-2000s for many reasons: her self-destructive and sometimes bizarre behaviour, her failure to conform to normative post-feminist femininity (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014), her controversial relationships, and her popularity as a somewhat unlikely mainstream pop artist. Paparazzi intrusions on her privacy produced a constant stream of images, the interpretation of which was frequently used for unsolicited analysis of her physical and mental health. These images also provided material for a series of quickly produced media obituaries to Winehouse after her death in July 2011, such as 'Amy Winehouse: A Tribute' (ITV2). In subsequent years, such fascination with Winehouse continues, and audiovisual explorations of her life and death range from the intimate, as in 'The Amy Winehouse Story' (Channel 4), to the ghoulish in 'Autopsy: Amy Winehouse' (5*). Hearsom and Inglis argue that 'obituary writing is not ... value-free, but acutely reveals public expressions of taste and value' (2010, p. 240). If so, what do such audiovisual post-mortems of Winehouse tell us about the nature and framing of contemporary fame? This article analyses Asif Kapadia's cinematic biography, *Amy* (2015) in the light of this question.

Like Kapadia's previous documentary *Senna* (2010), *Amy* presents a mosaic of archive images illustrating recollections from friends and family delivered in voiceover, not as talking heads; a stylistic decision that produces an intimate mode of storytelling. Because it largely follows a chronological path through Winehouse's life, the film is modelled on a familiar 'rise-and-fall' narrative. In the first half, we see a gifted young woman develop rapidly as a credible jazz artist. The second focuses on the escalation of Winehouse's considerable health problems as her fame and the success of her second album spiral out of control. The middle part of the film is

structured on the irony of these opposing trajectories - the ascendancy of the 'artist', the decline of the 'real' Winehouse.

The use of amateur footage in the film reveals a Winehouse rarely remembered, but easily discernible from the lyrics of her songs, one with a caustic wit, emotional literacy, and fiery intelligence. Kapadia presents these lyrics as videographic additions to the archive images he uses, foregrounding them as part of Winehouse's story. As a self-consciously autobiographical lyricist, Winehouse is a gift to the filmmaker. Her songs map closely to the story told, and Kapadia is careful to include on-screen reminders from Winehouse herself that she is *only* able to write from personal experience, as if to justify his quite literal biographical readings of her lyrics. In addition to the lyrics, Winehouse's own voice-over recollections are interspersed with those of her colleagues and loved ones. Feminist biography scholars such as Wagner-Martin (1994) have advocated an open form of biographical writing that foregrounds the subject's own voice. Glimpses of such praxis are available in these moments in the film, but they are all too fleeting, overtaken by the (often male) voices of those around her.

Winehouse's suspicion of celebrity culture is documented in her lyrics to 'Fuck me Pumps':

Cuz you all look the same,

Everyone knows your name,

And that's your whole claim to fame.

The film mines Winehouse's proclaimed anxiety over her impending fame for dramatic irony; she states outright in voiceover that she believes she would "go mad" if she became famous. Emphasising her discomfort with the cultures of celebrity production underlines the film's construction of her authenticity. For instance, we see Winehouse's face move from bemusement to amusement as a music journalist attempts to compare her to Dido, a contemporary female artist for whom she clearly has little regard. The film allows this awkward moment to rest long enough for the viewer to register the meaning of this comparison between the overproduced, bland pop singer and the 'authentic' Winehouse. The moment is also a useful metonym for the project of the film, that is, to document the transition of Winehouse from ephemeral celebrity to icon. It is productive to remember that in 2003, Dido was much better known than Winehouse. Of course, as a critically acclaimed post-mortem of the star, the film adds significant weight in its own right to this transition.

This playful version of Winehouse contrasts uneasily with the dishevelled, sickly woman familiar from paparazzi photography of her later life, used in the second half of the film in a manner that is ethically questionable, inasmuch as it exploits the very images of Winehouse whose production it critiques. The early part of the film privileges images of Winehouse captured through the personal archives of friends and family, or sanctioned media appearances, and the second consists largely of illicitly obtained tabloid imagery. The use of different kinds of archive footage can be read as metacommentary on Winehouse's life story: the mediated image overtakes the self-construction of the celebrity. Through frenetic editing and sound design, the film captures this viscerally: the horror of the constant hubbub of her life, the bombardment by camera lights, the noise, the frightening sense that she was never and yet always alone. This affective use of the paparazzi archive provides a

facsimile experience of (apparently) unsolicited celebrity, to underscore the film's explanation - not as far as excuse - for Winehouse's desire to lose herself to drink and drugs.

Here, the storytelling is in line with the paternalistic commentary that appeared in the contemporary broadsheet press. This generally treated Winehouse as a victim, if not a passive one, of her own success, and framed her out-of-control behaviour as pathological (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014). Kapadia had the luxury of time to be more measured than these immediate responses, although his conclusions seem to be largely consonant with them. As Milly Williamson has shown, recurrent narratives of decline and self-destruction in contemporary celebrity culture, though applied to figures as diverse as Kerry Katona and Britney Spears, are defiantly gendered (and classed) (2010). Winehouse's story is framed within, and fails to challenge, a hackneyed cultural narrative of the disorder and instability of the troubled female celebrity. The film aims to distinguish Winehouse from similar celebrity figures by emphasizing her talent, diminishing the sense that her fame is somehow illegitimate or unearned (Holmes and Negra 2011, p.3.). Insistent reminders – usually from luminaries of the music industry - of Winehouse's quality as a songwriter and artist are included throughout to legitimate her as a worthy subject for a serious film biography.

Kapadia's stated aim in making the film was to reveal the 'real' Amy.ⁱ The poster's tagline underlines this, claiming it would portray 'the girl behind the name'. Hearsom notes, in relation to a different posthumous tribute to Winehouse (by her former manager, Nick Godwyn, who appears in the film) that the use of 'real' 'equate[s] a personal view with fact' (2012 p. 187). Though the film's tonal register is of

authenticity and intimacy (particularly through the use of personal archive), Kapadia's *Amy* is no more 'real' than the distanced, vilified phantom photographed in tabloid newspapers. In claiming to present the 'real' Amy, Kapadia disavows the obvious constructedness of his *version* of Winehouse. This is antithetical to current understandings of biography (Lee 2009), which have emphasised the role of a biographer's authorship in shaping the subject's life story and the power imbalance this creates. Though Kapadia's sympathy for Winehouse is clearly evident in the film, his willingness to conform with the 'victim' narrative outlined above, and his identification of Winehouse's father and husband as largely responsible for her troubles, can be read as patriarchal and patronising.

The critical and commercial successes of *Amy* suggest that it will become one of Winehouse's key biographical texts. As her most visible obituary, what 'public expressions of taste and value', in Hearnsum and Inglis's terms, are revealed? The film shows that cultural concerns about the shift to the 'momentary, visual and sensational over the enduring, written and rational' (Turner, 2004, p. 4) are complicated by the transition from evanescent celebrity to cultural icon through practices of biography. Biography, whether verbal or visual, collates the fragments of a life into digestible narratives that allow for a contextualised, authored understanding of the meaning of that life. In the case of *Amy*, it appears that underlying cultural narratives that enfeeble and victimise famous (troubled) women are so pervasive as to colour even a considered and skilful nonfiction depiction. *Amy* clearly adds substantially to Winehouse's complex ongoing celebrity text, but that it does so utilising a narrative structure that is derivative and ideologically conservative is disappointing.

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ⁱ Stated in the pre-screening live interview at the pre-release simultaneous live screening of the film on 30 June 2015.